Nature of Truth in Art: A Re-evaluation

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ALTHOUGH a number of apologies have been written down the centuries to vindicate the truth-value of art, the issue remains to be conclusively clinched. It was Plato who in his *The Republic* complained that artists 'are…third in succession from the throne of truth' (Plato 327). Ever since Plato attacked poetry on grounds of misrepresentation, the charge has been renewed from time to time. In every age, the advocates of art have tried in their own way to defend art against the imputation of untruth. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry*, for example, argued that 'of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar'; whereas 'to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false', the poet 'nothing affirms therefore never lieth' (Sidney 38). Jeremy Bentham reiterated the charge in the 19th century. In *The Rationale of Reward*, on finding the language of poetry deficient in scientific precision, he dismissively pronounced: 'The poet always stands in need of something false' (qtd. in Abrams 301). The old charge has come back in a new guise in our time. It is being argued that what is *represented* cannot be true, for to represent is to use a *substitute* which is distinct from the original. The present essay, which is not an apology but an exploration, undertakes to re-examine the issue in an attempt to understand the precise nature of truth in art.

'Truth' is a heavily loaded term and the word carries different shades of meaning in different registers. What is true to philosophers may not be so to scientists. In oriental philosophy, truth has been defined as *kālatrayābādhitam*, something which transcends temporal boundaries or which is not limited by the periods of time—past, present and future. It is generally held that what we call truth has certain properties: it is correct, unvarying, and universal. Truth, which is an attribute suggestive of flawlessness and universality, apparently depends on correspondence to fact. To borrow Martin Heidegger's words, 'truth is *correspondence, grounded in correctness, between proposition and thing*' (Heidegger 2). The paradox of aesthetic truth is that what is un-verifiable for being a product of the imagination is acknowledged as true in art. Rabindranath

Tagore's remark on the question of the literary value of factual writing sheds some light on its unique nature. In his essay 'Sāhityer Uddeśya' ('The Purpose of Literature'), Tagore observes:

> When shall I call a historical writing literature? When I know that it can survive even though the historical part has been proved to be false. That is, when I will find that history is not the end, but just an excuse.[1] (My translation) (*Sāhitya* 176)

In other words, truth in art does not consist in factuality and therefore it does not wait upon documentation. In his essay 'Tathya o Satya ('Fact and Truth') Tagore distinguishes fact from truth, the former presents the world as it is, the latter presents the essence on which the actual is based. Tagore concludes that in art truth is ultimately determined not by correspondence to fact but by whether or not it succeeds in stimulating *rasa*, the aesthetic relish:

> The *rasa* it inspires is the proof of the truth of a thing in literature and art.[2] (My translation) (*Sahityer Pathe* 57)

This does not mean art has no truce with facts or it would lose its truth value if it draws considerably upon the factual. Prof. S.C. Sengupta has rightly observed:

> It is true mere lifelikeness does not make a picture artistic, but that is no reason why a work of art that is lifelike should on that ground alone be inartistic, nor is there any reason for thinking that it would be artistic if it were not like life. (Sengupta 185)

In other words, art may borrow from the real, but it gets recognition as art only when it transcends the real.

If we probe deeper into this matter we will find that the laws of art and those of the real world are distinct. The fearful in the art world is not dreadful but charming, like dinosaurs in Jurassic Park or sharks in Jaws. What is tragic in art rends our heart and moves us to tears, at the same time it fills us with such ineffable joy that we want to re-live the experience, not to avoid it. One interesting paradox of art is that here meticulous adherence to factual truth or its transgression is neither a merit, nor a demerit. Tagore mentions of a Japanese painting by a master painter with a figure facing the sun but no shadow cast behind (*Sahityer Pathe* 57). Again, when Macbeth exclaims: 'this my hand will rather/ The multitudinous seas incarnadine,/ Making the green one red' (*Mac*. 2.2.60-62) we do not find fault with the expression because in real life green is

not the colour of the seas. We rather try to understand and interpret why Shakespeare wrote so. The world of art is really a unique *heterocosm* where factuality may diminish the truth value of a work whereas the touch of the imagination may enhance it. Or else, Ben Jenson would have been a greater artist than Shakespeare (Dryden 71).

In *On the Art of Poetry* Chapter IX while distinguishing history from art Aristotle asserts: 'the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary' (Aristotle 43). In short, truth value is added to aesthetic representation when what is represented is made *probable*. Aristotle reminds us of this secret of art when he says 'A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility' (Aristotle 84). S.H. Butcher translates the phrases 'likely impossibility' and 'unconvincing possibility' as 'probable impossibilities' and 'improbable possibilities' respectively (Butcher 95). One may venture to suggest here the subtle distinction between the possible and the probable. Close observation of what regularly happens in real life creates in our mind a sense of what is possible and what is impossible. As this sense comes from observation, it is governed by reasoning. Now what is impossible in life may be so represented as to appear probable in art. Mary Shelley's science fiction Frankenstein tells us the story of investing a skeleton with life. Although such a proposition is absolutely absurd, in the novel this reads quite probable. Admittedly, the sense of what is probable is not gathered from the outer world but comes from within, literally *ab intra*. What happens is an induced suspension of world knowledge which Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* Chapter XIV theorizes as 'willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge 490). The spell cast by a work of art actually induces us to withhold all disbelief and accept even what is unlikely to happen in real life as something very much probable. In his essay 'Poetic Truth' S.H. Butcher has pertinently remarked that 'the laws of the physical world and the material conditions may conceivably be neglected, if only the inner consistency of the poetry is not sacrificed' (Butcher 173). It is impossible for a living person to step into the nether world. Yet in Dante's *Divine Comedy* the story of Dante visiting Inferno while still alive does not at all strike us as improbable. In Satyajit Ray's film *Gopi Gayen aar Bagha Bayen* Gopi and Bagha can reach anywhere within a second by just naming the place with a clap. Although this is absurd in life, the film creates conditions for its convincingness; for we know that from the king of ghosts they have received a miraculous gift

that will reach them anywhere they want to go. Art here creates conditions for rendering the impossible *probable*. On the other hand, a person may fall from a multi-storeyed building and may miraculously remain unhurt. Such apparently impossible but, strictly possible, events strike us as flatly unconvincing when these are presented in most Hollywood or Bollywood thrillers without necessary conditions for their plausibility. One understands why Butcher has put chance or irrational cause into the category of 'improbable possibility' which Aristotle disapproves of (Butcher 183). Admittedly, unless even the possible is made probable, it does not gain in truth value. So Oscar Wilde is absolutely right when in 'The Decay of Lying' he objects to naturalistic novels on grounds of improbability: they are 'so life-like that no one can possibly believe in their probability' (Wilde 973).

Art becomes art because of the magic touch of the imagination; it is the creative imagination that accounts for the aesthetic transformation—the transmutation of brass into gold: 'Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden' (Sidney 8). The change is qualitative, not quantitative; hence the impression does not depend on the number of verifiable facts present in the finished product. Yet realism often enhances rather than dilutes the truth value of a work provided it fulfils other aesthetic conditions. What is familiar can be conceptualized without over-stretching one's imagination, and hence apparently has greater convincingness than what is exotic. Without that superbly realistic make-up, Amitabh Bachchan's acting in *Paa* as a patient of progeria, admittedly, would have lost much of its charm. How much of realism is appropriate depends on the *rasa* inspired by that particular work of art. A work of science fiction and a play dramatizing a social problem, say the suffering of women in a patriarchal society as in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, cannot have the same degree of realism. The convincingness of the former depends on going beyond the real but the neglect of realism may detract from the plausibility of the latter. The eminent theorist Atul Chandra Gupta has rightly maintained:

> The portion of realism which does not enrich or intensify the *rasa* of poetry may be reckoned as a burden rather than an organic part of poetry.[3] (My translation) (Gupta 57)

Interestingly enough, evocation of realism to some extent also depends on the medium of representation of the particular work of art. The beauty of sunrise is described in literature; on the stage it is evoked through the use

of a scenic backdrop; and in a film one must take the camera to the sea-side or the mountain-top to make the representation most effective.

A just touch of realism no doubt enhances the truth value to art, but obsession with realism at the expense of the suggestive potentials of art may prove fatal. In his essay 'The Decay of Lying' Oscar Wilde argues this point very wittily and makes out a case for the truth value of art. As art springs from the imagination, he concedes that art is a form of lying; but then instead of being regretful he proceeds to lament that this unique form of lying is on the wane in contemporary literature (Wilde 972). Evidently, Wilde uses 'lying' in the sense of the vitality of imagination which catalyzes the aesthetic transfiguration. What he means is that since the art world is constructed, if anyone wants to describe art as false, in the puritanical sense of the term truth, he is right. Nevertheless, art has a different sort of truth value and, therefore, it does not deserve disparagement. Wilde ascribes the 'sterile' and 'commonplace' character of contemporary art to the 'morbid faculty of truth telling'. In our own time the same 'monstrous worship' of facts has produced the 'reality show', something which is 'physically real' rather than 'imaginatively true'. It blurs the distinction between imagination and make-believe, although this watershed is too important to be overlooked. At the touch of the former even the impossible appears probable, whereas the latter tries to cover up the deficiency of the imagination with a more palpable sensation but it cannot raise the possible to the level of the probable. Conversely, imagination which accounts for the aesthetic metamorphosis impairs the convincingness of art when it runs riot. Strictly speaking, nothing is un-imaginable; but when the content fails to create conditions for acceptance of what is presented as real, that is, when the content lacks inner consistency, the imagination involved impresses us as wild and wanton. The conclusion that may be drawn here is that, in art neither fact nor fiction can be disproportionate. Too much closeness to actuality of the kind found in naturalistic/socialist realistic works detracts from the truth value of art because here the poetic imagination has strong chance of getting impoverished. One recalls the sarcastic reaction of Engels who snubbed a writer for producing a formulaic work in violation of the conditions of art: 'Look at your heroine, with her *dialectical materialist* eyes and her *economic determinist* nose and her *surplus value* mouth. You take her in your arms and you kiss her. I know I wouldn't want to' (qtd. in Hall 142). On the other hand, although it is the creative imagination that helps an artist to transmute the real, this does not mean

the artist is licensed to spin out a cock and bull story turning well-known facts upside down. If Gandhiji is presented in jeans trousers, the representation becomes false, for it awfully strains our credulity. However, this very unreal picture of Gandhi may look not only probable but necessary in a fantasy like Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland* where caterpillars smoke hookah or pebbles turn into cakes.

Positivist philosophers like J.S. Mill, who considered empirical sciences to be the only source of knowledge, questioned the truth value of literature because here the language is metaphorical. Even if there be no violation of truth in the subject matter, the figurative representation of poetry struck them as affected and artificial and hence widely removed from what is true. The positivists refuse to take into account the fact that what enriches our experience, enhances our feeling and expands our insight into life cannot be deficient in truth value. The advocates of aesthetic truth meet this positivist charge with transparent glass theory. They argue that it is wrong to brand the figurative as false, for language is in essence like a transparent veil which, instead of hiding the inner reality, actually reveals it. George Granville's lines in 'An Essay upon Unnatural Flights of Poetry' are worth citing in this context:

> As Veils transparent cover, but not hide,
> Such metaphors appear, when right apply'd;
> When, thro' the phrase, we plainly see the sense,
> Truth, when the meaning's obvious, will dispense. (qtd. in Abrams 287)

With the emergence of new theories of representation, this blame of falsehood has become more stringent in recent times. It is argued that the world of art is a constructed reality which cannot be claimed as true. What is represented is divorced from reality, for it displaces and replaces the original with a substitute. Edward Said's words in *Orientalism* are worth quoting in this context:

> In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as "the Orient". (Said 21)

In essence, even when art is most true to life, it cannot help being false because it is represented; 'the truest poetry is the most feigning', as Touchstone would put it (*AYL* 3.3.16-17).

In *On the Art of Poetry* Chapter XXV Aristotle draws our attention to one paradox of literary representation. There may be some minor flaws in representation like the description of a running horse with both right legs thrown forward. Aristotle calls this 'accidental' incorrectness; it is excusable and therefore it does not neutralize the truth value of art (Aristotle 86). That we find even representational flaws excusable in art helps us understand why art has truth value despite its being a representation, that is, a substitution of the real with something else. Actually what we call truth in art is an induced feeling which does not wait upon factual precision. When we look at a picture of a lion or a horse, we do not judge its quality by measuring the length of the tail or the number of teeth. Truth here is expressed suggestively and therefore is not amenable to measurement by application of any external yardstick. In one of his memorable remarks the famous American painter Bob Gerbracht has shed light on the mystery in the following words: 'I am not interest (*sic*) in showing that I can paint every hair on a person's head, but I would like the viewer to wonder how I painted it so realistically without painting every hair' (Gerbracht). This is the secret of aesthetic truth—an impression of truth worked out by suggestive representation. As it is 'suggestive', factuality is secondary provided that the representation must be so as to inspire the desired feeling in the heart of the connoisseur.

The Vedantists propose three categories of truth: Truth Absolute, Truth Practical and Truth Illusory. They put ideas like god and soul into the first category. Evidently, these ideas are sustained by faith and cannot be established empirically. They look upon Truth Practical as a lower form of truth which is valid in practical life but which does not seem to be true in the strictest metaphysical sense. We know that hunger causes death, but judged from the idealistic perspective of the immortality of the soul, any such statement would be false. Although Vedantic philosophy is silent about Scientific Truth which is derived experimentally and therefore can be verified, they would probably include it in the category of what they call Truth Practical. According to Vedantic philosophers Truth Illusory is really a semblance of truth. It appears to be true but in reality is an illusion. It is like a dream which appears real when we dream it, but is looked upon as unreal as we wake up. Aesthetic truth possibly

belongs to this category (Truth Illusory), although art is not an illusion in the pejorative sense of the term. Here also we are in a limbo of undecidedness because the so-called unreal is to be acknowledged as true. This will be clear if we attempt to test the truth value of the following lines of Tagore in his poem 'Bhaktibhajan' (A Devotional Hymn):

> The path thinks 'I'm the Lord', the chariot thinks 'I'
> The idol thinks 'I'm the Lord', the Lord only smiles.[4] (My translation)
> (*Sanācayitā* 290)

As presented here, inanimate objects like chariot, idol and path are not only alive but capable of thinking. The proposition is apparently false because it is factually incorrect. But dare we question the truth value of the feeling voiced in the lines—that God is over and above the icons we worship as God? The given proposition is unreal only in the sense that it surpasses reality. Admittedly, what is false in the scientific sense of the term is accepted as true in art. Truth here does not depend on flawless correspondence to the real but unhesitating acceptance of the represented (hence 'unreal') as true. Aldous Huxley has this in mind when in his essay 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth' he defines aesthetic truth as 'acceptable verisimilitude' (Huxley 97). One understands why in his poem 'Ars Poetica' Archibald MacLeish so confidently writes:

> A Poem should be equal to;
> Not true.

Aesthetic truth rivals verifiable truth, it has no obligation to conform to empirical fact to proclaim its veracity.

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2. 'sāhitya o ārte kono vastu je satya tār promān hay raser bhūmikāy'.
3. 'vastur vāstavātār je aṃśa kāvyer raske abhivyanājita vā pusta nā kare, se aṃśa kāvyer amāga nay, kāvyer bojhā'.
4. "path bhāve 'āmi dev' rath bhāve 'āmi'
'mūrti' bhāve āmi dev, hāse antaryāmī".

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